Book Review: Social Policies and Social Control: New perspectives on the "Not-so-Big Society" edited by Malcolm Harrison & Teela Sanders

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2014-9-9

This collection seeks to provides an innovative account of social control and behaviourism within welfare systems and social policies, and the implications for disadvantaged groups. The authors consider the controls, assumptions and persuasions applied to individuals and households and explores broader themes, including how 'new behaviourism' was consolidated during the New Labour and Cameron periods. For anyone interested in 'nudges' this is a good starting point, finds ***Lee Gregory.***

Social Policies and Social Control: New perspectives on the "Not-so-Big Society". Malcolm Harrison & Teela Sanders (eds). Policy Press. 2014.

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The study of social policies often becomes so entrenched in the minute detail of policy changes and their the potential impacts that it is possible for the wider implications of change to be overlooked. This focus on the details becomes pertinent as researchers and academics become increasingly specialised in a particular policy area, leaving wider trends and changes to be missed.

To remedy this, *Social Policies and Social Control* offers a text which cuts through a range of policy domains to bring new insights on one cross cutting concept in policy analysis: social control. Through the discussions offered by the editors and contributors, the reader is left with a clearer grasp of two central themes. First, the way in which social control can be theorised and drawn into the analysis of policy. Second, a renewed realisation that the construction of social problems lends itself to increasing control within a political context where governments conversely claim to be increasing the freedom and choice of individual citizens.

Part one starts by tracking the conventional wisdom around the increasing individualisation and behaviourist explanations of social problems attached to the logic of rational actor theory which has grown in the UK (and beyond) since the early 1980s. Here we are reminded of key themes which have permeated policy debate for over thirty years: social breakdown, dependency on the state, lack of individual responsibility, and the distinction between deserving and undeserving. But what is striking about this discussion is that it is used to underpin the presentation of "the division of social control". Drawing upon the division of welfare outlined by Richard Titmuss (1958), Harrison and Sanders provide us with a useful division for classifying social control. Consequently, whilst the powerful in society are often supported by the state, the middle-class and "deserving" categories of citizens experience forms of control around "nudges" to induce certain, preferred, behaviours, whereas disadvantaged groups and individuals are subjected to more obtrusive and overt forms of discipline. The division of social control reminds us that all policies contain an element of citizen control, embedded within their design. This highlights the first key theme indicated above.

The second is developed by Brown in the third chapter, focused on the construction of vulnerability. Brown demonstrates how the vulnerable are presented as a group which social justice demands we intervene to help and support – even protect. Their inclusion in society and wellbeing is at risk, thus state intervention contains a benevolence which is difficult to challenge and critique. Yet Brown demonstrates how notions of "the vulnerable" do not simply encourage protection, but facilitates controlling interventions and an identification of citizens as having

inferior behaviour and as being “less-able”. Consequently the vulnerable are presented as a troublesome group but within individualistic terms – little attentions is paid to wider causes of vulnerability or the more positive construction of the term in a universalistic sense: that we are all vulnerable to the structural causes of social problems and therefore rely on interdependence to survive. Brown’s key point is that vulnerability has moved beyond protection to serve regulatory practices of the state.

Wallace’s chapter on disciplined communities is one example where a number of these broader themes are drawn out and applied to a particular policy area. Similar to the discussion by Martin in his chapter, Wallace reminds us that there is a critical stream in social policy that has perceived policy interventions into the lives of the poorest as an effort to control and incentivise certain behaviours within this group. For Martin this is a core aspect of UK education systems since their early conception as religious schools for instruction of moral behaviour. Wallace argues that whilst New Labour’s efforts to activate and responsibilise communities had marginal impact, the coalition has sought to build on this activity but drawing upon geographical location as a key element of the social breakdown thesis.

Wallace suggests that this promotion of self-help not only places new pressures on individual and community agency, but starts to reshape access rights to welfare provision. We have seen increased conditionality as a pre-requisite to state benefits. Could the coalition’s localism agenda be rolling this out into other areas of policy, so that welfare is provided where citizens are connected to the right forms of local self-help? There is a potential wider critique of behaviourist interventions embedded in Wallace’s discussion here which needs further investigation. In a similar way, Martin’s discussion of the lives of young people and schooling illustrates a range of measures which seek to promote the right sort of behaviour amongst young people and, in doing so, highlights how these expanding efforts to shape citizen behaviour are embedded within our formative interactions with the state and wider society. Thus how we perceive our roles as citizens, the sort of lives we wish to lead and how we learn to think of others in our society is shaped by these behaviourist policies and their individualised, pathologising explanations of social problems.

Overall the text provides an explicit focus on a concept which cuts across policy areas and as such is an invaluable resource for students of social policy. But it also encourages the reader to consider how some of the changes to the presentation of social problems and the policy responses in turn shape how citizens perceive themselves, their communities, and the role of the state. Consequently the text offers a refreshed concept for policy analysis but it does only provide some small insights into alternative constructions of problems and policies which move away from the state dominant view. That said, the analysis offered provides a good starting point for future work in this area.

Lee Gregory is a lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Birmingham. His research interests include poverty, public health and alternative forms of welfare provision. Read more reviews by Lee.